



# Subject Guide

## Indigenous Australians and Volunteering – Take a closer look

For organisations, managers and trainers who would like to learn more about involving Indigenous Australians in volunteering



NVSC is a project of Volunteering Australia

Funded by the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

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Published by Volunteering Australia

First published June 2007

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These learning materials are published by Volunteering Australia for the National Volunteer Skills Centre and funded by the Australian Government department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

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ARBN 062 806 464

ISBN 10: 1-921213-29-9

ISBN 13: 978-1-921213-29-8

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*Indigenous Australians and Volunteering – Take a Closer Look* can be used in conjunction with the online Subject Guide – Indigenous Australians and Volunteering on Volunteering Australia's website. The Subject Guide lists free resources that can be accessed on the internet and is divided into four sections:

1. *Fast facts* to help you gain an understanding of issues related to Indigenous Australians and volunteering.
2. *Strategies for organisations*, providing a more in-depth look into this subject so that organisations can involve Indigenous Australians more effectively.
3. *Research findings*, reports and journal articles to extend your understanding of this subject.
4. *Indigenous Australians and Volunteering – Take a Closer Look* in PDF format forms the final section of the online Subject Guide.

The online Subject Guide is accessible at <http://www.volunteeringaustralia.org> > Publications.



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## A SNAPSHOT OF INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS

The 2001 ABS Census showed that 410,003 Australians identified as being 'Indigenous', which represented 2.2% of the total population of Australia.

Of these 410,003 Indigenous Australians:

- 366,429 identified as being Aboriginal;
- 26,046 identified as being Torres Strait Islanders; and
- 17,528 identified as being both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

Indigenous Australians live in all parts of Australia – from cities to small remote communities.

The term 'Indigenous' refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who are the first inhabitants of Australia. A person can only be identified as being Indigenous by:

- being of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent;
- identifying as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person; and
- being accepted as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person by the community in which they live.

Indigenous Australians do not have one single culture. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have a rich diversity of traditions, customs and languages, and the issues Indigenous communities deal with also vary greatly. It's therefore important to remember not to adopt a 'one-style-fits-all' approach when communicating with Indigenous Australians.

With this in mind, the information in this subject guide presents some of the common things to be aware of and is intended for use as an aid only. It is aimed primarily at not-for-profit organisations and managers of volunteers who have had limited or no experience in working with Indigenous Australian volunteers.

Face-to-face communication – where you can confirm volunteers' understanding and clarify if required – is important.

## HOW CULTURE CAN INFLUENCE BEHAVIOUR AND COMMUNICATION

- Involving volunteers from Indigenous backgrounds may present challenges and barriers, especially to organisations that have had little or no involvement in working with Indigenous Australians.
- To appreciate other cultures, we each need to be conscious of our own cultural norms, including our values and how they affect our lifestyle and work patterns, and how these might differ for people from Indigenous backgrounds.
- Remember that culture influences the way people behave, and these differences will often transcend language. For example, some aspects of Indigenous culture that may affect behaviour and communication include:
  - the way that people manage time and whether they are comfortable making appointments and sticking to or creating schedules;
  - how much information is usually communicated in any given situation, and how formally or informally this is communicated;
  - the way that people engage in conversation and how long it may take them to reply;
  - how people view personal space, and how much personal distance is appropriate;
  - the use of eye-contact – in some Indigenous communities it is disrespectful to look someone directly in the eye; and
  - how people treat and relate to different genders.
- It's important to understand that effective-cross cultural communication is a two-way process that often has more to do with providing the right type of response (often these are non-verbal) for a particular situation, than with finding the right words.

### Tips for effective communication

- Remember that having an open and honest approach is an essential foundation for effective communication.
- Ensure that the orientation you provide to volunteers includes lots of face-to-face communication and that you allow enough time to go through each aspect of your organisation, such as internal policies and procedures.
- Provide information in writing as well, but remember that people have different levels of literacy. Make sure that any written information is in clear, plain language.
- Remember to use simple English and avoid the use of jargon and acronyms.
- Don't try to copy or mimic Indigenous ways of speaking.
- Understand that being too direct can be may be seen by Indigenous people as being confrontational and/or rude.
- Confirm volunteers' understanding by seeking verbal acknowledgement.

## WHAT CAN VOLUNTEERING OFFER PEOPLE FROM INDIGENOUS BACKGROUNDS?

It's important to acknowledge that Indigenous Australians have already made and continue to make important contributions to communities through volunteering.

*Policies of self-determination from the late 60s have required the substantially voluntary time and effort of Aboriginal people on innumerable boards, committees, government inquiries and consultative bodies from local, state and national levels and often across a diverse range of issue areas including health, education, arts, sports, youth to tourism, economic development and criminal justice sectors. The immense contribution of Indigenous people to mainstream society through cultural tourism, contribution to land management and in advisory capacities regarding the delivery of mainstream services to all citizens is often unacknowledged by the wider society.<sup>1</sup>*

Irrespective of an individual's cultural background, level of education, age or gender, volunteering is a key way in which people contribute to their communities, meet new people, and learn new skills and knowledge.

Approximately 60% of Indigenous Australians are under 25 years old, and volunteering can be a great pathway to gaining paid employment and can also help build personal and professional development. Volunteering can also be a particularly attractive way of gaining practical experience in a workplace.

### Training opportunities for volunteers

Providing opportunities for volunteers to gain knowledge and learn new skills is a key way in which organisations can support and value their volunteers. Findings from Volunteering Australia's 2006 *National Survey of Volunteering Issues* show that volunteers themselves value and recognise the benefits of engaging in development activities, with 81% of volunteers surveyed stating that they would personally appreciate having their work recognised in the form of opportunities to develop their skills.

Training opportunities will be of particular interest to young volunteers, as many young people see volunteering as a chance to learn specific skills that may help them gain paid employment in a certain area. Accredited training is likely to appeal to young volunteers more than non-accredited training, as it has more authority on a resume. If your organisation offers accredited training, this could be a significant drawcard. If you deliver particular accredited units or modules of training, show how these can be mapped to other qualifications.

If you are aware that this is one of the primary reasons for a person wanting to volunteer, then you are able to start the process of identifying how you can provide them with a volunteering experience that meets their needs.

Have a look at the guide *Do Your Volunteers Need Training?*, which takes you through the process of how to identify the skills and knowledge your volunteers currently have, determine the are gaps between what they know and what they need/want to know, and work out the best ways in which you can support your volunteers to learn. This resource is available as a downloadable PDF from.

<sup>1</sup> Kerr, L., Savelsberg, H., Sparrow, S. & Tedmanson, D. 2001, *Experiences and perceptions of volunteering in Indigenous and non-English speaking background communities*. Adelaide: Social Policy Research Group, University of South Australia.

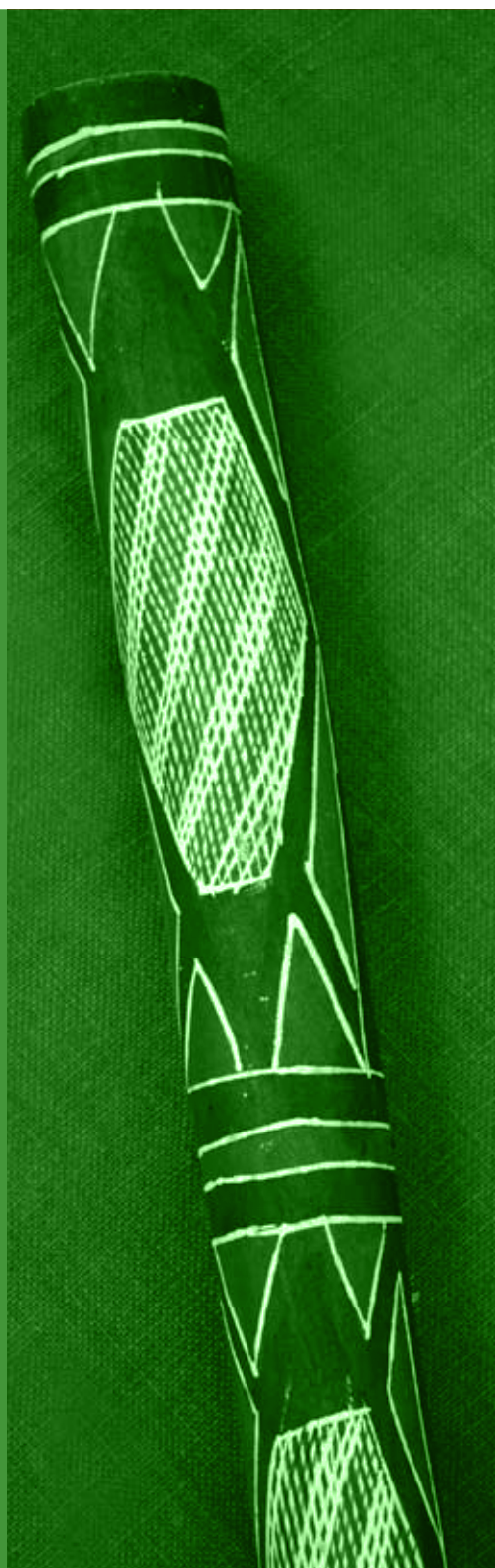
## PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE – TIPS FOR RECRUITING VOLUNTEERS FROM INDIGENOUS BACKGROUNDS

Clear communication and effective ways of reaching people from Indigenous backgrounds are key components to successful recruitment of volunteers.

Remember that the concept of volunteering can be understood in many different ways and it is important that you can describe (in plain language) what it means to be a volunteer, and what your organisation can offer volunteers.

Word-of-mouth promotion works best and hearing about your organisation from a friend, relative or other community member is often seen as a more credible and trustworthy source of information.

- Streamline your recruitment practices – make it easy for people to get involved. Cut down on the amount of paperwork that volunteers are required to complete, or consider incorporating the information you need into the interview process. Remember that too many forms to fill out can be seen as a barrier to volunteering.
- Understand that people may feel nervous on their first day of volunteering, and Indigenous volunteers may feel especially isolated if they are new to working in a more formal, structured environment. Minimise the risk of people feeling isolated by ensuring you introduce new volunteers to all existing staff as part of their orientation, and consider providing extra support to these volunteers such as establishing a mentor or buddy system.
- Get to know your local Indigenous communities, and work on building relationships with community elders. Contact your local council who may be able to help in putting you in contact with relevant community elders.
- Be specific about what your organisation can offer. It may be a reference, something to add to their CV, training, meeting new people, personal satisfaction, helping a cause they believe in or learning new skills. Spell it out.
- Be flexible about times and days and remember that the way in which people manage time can vary between cultures and communities. Understand that not all volunteers have the same amount of free time.
- Develop policies for your organisation that are inclusive of diversity. Don't be exclusive – think of all groups in our society as potential volunteers and don't leave anyone out. Develop policies that recognise and harness our community diversity.
- Remember to recognise the important contribution that volunteers bring to your organisation. December 5th was declared as International Volunteer Day by the UN General Assembly in 1985. In Australia, it has been designed as a day for the recognition of volunteer involvement, a day on which organisations can thank their volunteer staff.



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## INDIGENOUS TERMINOLOGY

- **Elder** An Aboriginal man or woman may be given the title of 'elder' in recognition of their knowledge and skill and respected position within their communities. An elder has the permission to speak on behalf of their community and is the holder of traditional knowledge and customs. Some elders will be referred to by their communities as 'Uncle' or 'Aunty'; however it is important that non-Indigenous people only use these titles when they have been invited to do so.

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- **Aboriginal** A person of Aboriginal descent who identifies as an Aboriginal person and who is accepted as an Aboriginal person by the community in which they live.

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- **Anangu\*** commonly used within the Aboriginal community to identify an Aboriginal person who has originated from Central Northern Territory

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- **Indigenous Australians** refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who are the first inhabitants of Australia.

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- **Koori/Koorie\*** commonly used within the Aboriginal community to identify an Aboriginal person who has originated from New South Wales, Victoria or Tasmania.

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- **Murri/Murrie\*** commonly used within the Aboriginal community to identify an Aboriginal person who has originated from Queensland.

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- **Nunga\*** commonly used within the Aboriginal community to identify an Aboriginal person who has originated from South Australia.

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- **Nyoongah\*** commonly used within the Aboriginal community to identify an Aboriginal person who has originated from Western Australia.

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- **Torres Strait Islander** a descendent of an Indigenous inhabitant of the Torres Strait Islands, which lie between the tip of Cape York in Queensland and Papua New Guinea.

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- **Yolngu\*** commonly used within the Aboriginal community to identify an Aboriginal person who has originated from the top end of the Northern Territory

\*Please note: Non-Indigenous people should not refer to Aboriginal people by any of the above names unless they have been invited to do so.